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SUBJECT: COLOMBIA'S LEFT STRUGGLES FOR POLITICAL SPACE

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Summary

1. (SBU) During eight years of an extremely popular center-right Uribe Administration, Colombia's political left has struggled to define itself, its opposition role, and ways to influence national institutions of power. The left has been fractured, changing, and not united by shared objectives or a charismatic leader. The left currently holds only 28% of Senate and House seats. Yet this election season, leftist parties hope to join forces to prevent another term for Uribe or a pro-Uribe successor. The center-left Liberal Party (PL) is looking to reinvigorate itself and return to power while the leftist Alternative Democratic Pole (PDA) struggles to grow beyond its base. Smaller left parties like the Greens or the Social Bolivarian Movement (MSB) have very limited national influence. The left is not fundamentally anti-American, but has criticized the Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA). The "terrorist sympathizer" label and Uribe's dramatic security gains leave the left little political space on security issues. The left's future success lies in addressing traditional social issues, where it has yet to fully demonstrate it can be constructive rather than simply playing opposition to the Uribe coalition. End Summary.

Shift to the Right and Center

2. (SBU) In Colombia's current political spectrum, the far-left is almost non-existent and the left is much smaller than the center or right. Historically, Colombians have identified themselves as either moderate right or moderate left, leading to centrist government policies. Given the prominence of security concerns and Colombians' exasperation with leftist guerillas like the

Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), it is not surprising that the political spectrum now principally ranges from the far-right to the center. In nationwide polls conducted by the National University in 2005 and 2007, Colombians identified themselves as follows:

	Aug-Sep 2005	October 2007	%Change
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Far Left	7.7%	6.2%	-0.5%
Moderate Left	10.8%	7.2%	-3.6%
Center	36.6%	49.5%	+12.9%
Moderate Right	24.1%	14.4%	-9.7%
Far Right	20.8%	22.7%	+1.9%

Political Parties & Possible Coalitions

13. (SBU) Most Colombians are not strongly ideological or members of political parties, and vote based on issues and personalities. Leftist Alternative Democratic Pole (PDA) presidential candidate Gustavo Petro told us that Colombians do not think in terms of right or left, but seek solutions to their problems. Half of the respondents that identified themselves as "far left" in the above polls supported President Alvaro Uribe. Similarly, political parties are largely multi-class, have drifted towards the center, and provide relatively little variance in policy proposals. Politicians often switch parties and even run for president under different banners.

14. (SBU) Historically, politics was dominated by the center-right Conservative Party (PC) and the center-left Liberal Party (PL), which often conspired to prevent far-left parties or candidates from gaining power. Recently, as Uribe and new centrist parties emerged, the PC has shifted a bit to the right. The PL is currently a mixture of center and left. Four years ago, most small leftist parties (ranging from center-left to communist) merged into the PDA, successfully creating a nationally significant, legitimate left party. But even the PDA has more centrist members than far-left. With one House seat, the Green Party is the only other opposition left party with national representation. The Social Bolivarian Movement (MSB), widely viewed as allied with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, has yet to make a splash in national politics. On the center-right side, Uribe's popularity has made his "U" Party (which started as a splinter from the PL) the strongest in terms of national-level representation. The PC, Radical Change (CR, a PL spinoff with a strong security focus but opposed to Uribe's reelection), Citizen Convergence, and five smaller parties round out the governing congressional coalition. A December Gallup poll of the four largest cities showed 67% of Colombians did not belong to any party, 14% belonged to the PL, 6% to the U, 5% to PC, 3% to PDA, and 0.25% to CR.

15. (SBU) A July 14 political reform permits parties to select a joint presidential candidate. Originally perceived as benefiting the ruling parties, pro-Uribe hopefuls now seem more divided than opposition candidates who have embraced the coalition idea as the only way to defeat the Uribe camp in 2010 (see ref A for elections overview). Even the PDA, initially determined to go it alone, is now pursuing the joint-ticket strategy. In an opposition coalition, the PL will be the pivot party, possessing the strongest nationwide structure and lying politically between the PDA, Green

Party, independent centrist candidate Sergio Fajardo, and right-leaning but anti-reelection CR (though CR refuses to ally with the PDA and Fajardo wants to maintain his independence). A center-right coalition is also possible among the U Party, the PC, CR, and/or the smaller parties.

Liberals on the Rebound

16. (SBU) The PL, though trending downward since it left the country's presidency in 1998, is still Colombia's strongest party in terms of nationwide infrastructure and membership. The PL continues to control important governorships, mayoralties, and the highest number of municipal councilors. However, the PL currently only holds 39 of the 166 seats in the House and 18 of the 102 Senate seats. The PL is on the rebound following a low-point when it lost half of its caucus to Uribe's coalition, was perceived as a dinosaur of the old feudal party system, struggled with internal

divisions, and was mired in the "Proceso 8000" investigation of Cali cartel narcotics funds being used in President Ernesto Samper's 1994 election campaign. In 2005, former President Cesar Gaviria, a centrist, took control of the party and successfully restored the PL by sidelining radicals led by Samper (ref B). Moving the PL to center and Gaviria's statesmanship reinvigorated the party. The party has been less successful in modernizing itself and promoting internal democracy -- party machinery still rules.

17. (SBU) The weak voter turnout in the PL and PDA's September primaries (ref C) disappointed those who hoped to make a strong statement against a third Uribe term (see ref D on referendum to allow a third term). However, Mario Solano, Secretary General of the U Party, warned us not to underestimate the strength of the opposition's base. During its congress on December 12-13, the PL continued to opt for unity, giving presidential candidate Rafael Pardo absolute control (Gaviria resigned as party president). Pardo now directs the campaign budget, can name a new executive committee and secretary general, and can make strategic decisions with minimal consultation. He was also given the authority to form a coalition with other parties for the presidential elections. Pardo captures 7 to 11% of voter intent per December polls.

PDA Growing Pains

18. (C) The PDA, created in 2005 through the merger of a broad range of small leftist parties, is still consolidating its identity and electoral base. Party leaders are proud that the PDA is the only significant, legitimate leftist party in Colombia. A unified left is necessary to meet the vote thresholds required for official party status and benefits. The PDA -- comprised largely of middle class teachers, unionists, and government employees -- is split between pragmatists (led by presidential candidate and current Senator Petro) and far-left-wing members (led by Carlos Gaviria). Jaime Dussan, PDA president and Senator, told poloffs that the party will remain integrated to protect its niche. Still, Luis Eduardo Garzon, a prominent former mayor of Bogota, left the party in protest over the inclusion of far left and communist elements. Since he surprisingly defeated Gaviria in the primaries, Petro's moderate platform is steadily edging out more radical doctrines as the party prepares for the 2010 congressional and presidential elections. Petro captures 8 to 12% of voter intent per December polls.

¶9. (SBU) PDA expansion has slowed after initial electoral success -- it won 18 congressional seats in 2006, Gaviria came in a strong second (22%) to Uribe in the 2006 presidential elections, and the PDA retained the Bogota mayor's office and gained the Narino governorship in the 2007 regional and local elections. The PDA currently holds 11 of 102 Senate seats and 7 of 166 House seats. The exclusionary approach of some, perceived ties to the FARC, and the poor performance of current Bogota Mayor Samuel Moreno have hurt confidence in the PDA's ability to govern. Moreno suffers from a 61% (once 71%) disapproval rating. PDA Secretary General Carlos Bula told us the PDA is starting to make progress again, particularly in the departments of Atlantico, Santander, and Tolima.

Tiny Green Party Poised for Growth

¶10. (SBU) The Center Green Option (Green Party) -- formed in 2005 by two former M-19 guerrillas -- is poised for some growth. The party failed to win the minimum votes for official recognition in the 2006 elections, but won the special seat in the House of Representatives reserved for political minorities. The seat gives the party official status and allows it to access state funding and field candidates without signature drives. The Greens gained momentum this year when they formed an alliance with three popular ex-mayors of Bogota known as the "three tenors" -- Enrique Penalosa, Antanas Mockus, and Garzon. Although the Green Party and the ex-mayors differ somewhat ideologically, the marriage of convenience furthers all sides' political aspirations. The Green Party placed Garzon at the head of its candidate list for the Senate, and the Greens stand a good chance of expanding in Congress beyond their single seat. Presidential candidate Mockus captures only 2% of voter intent per a December poll.

No Bolivarian Project

¶11. (C) The Colombian left's relationship with Venezuelan President Chavez is always questioned, but overall it has little connection with his Bolivarian socialism. PDA leaders told us the PDA is "democratic" not "socialist." The Colombian political environment has little room for being "Chavista" -- polls give Chavez a 5% favorable and 75% unfavorable rating (worst of any public figure), and he will continue to be reviled as a result of his aggressive economic, political, and military rhetoric and actions towards Colombia (refs E and F). Pardo stated that border communities are being subjected to the "Barbary of Chavez." Petro equates Chavez and the FARC as sources of instability in Colombia, and said each episode of Chavez saber-rattling helps Uribe. Even David Corredor, the presidential candidate from the small Colombian Bolivarian Socialist Movement (MSB), feels compelled to publicly declare that he is not a Chavista.

¶12. (SBU) The MSB, though, is a declared socialist party, and the National Electoral Council has opened an investigation into possible Venezuelan financing of the signature drive that placed Corredor on the presidential ballot. The July 14 political reform bans foreign campaign financing under what observers call the "Chavez Clause." Also adding to suspicions, Corredor has a weekly radio program on Venezuela's "Radio of the South." Corredor claims he was invited to use airtime on the BRV-run station for the benefit of socialism. Although Corredor receives substantial attention as a possible entree for Chavez' brand of socialism in Colombia, his MSB has no congressional seats and is a long way from becoming a strong movement.

¶13. (SBU) The Colombian left is not characterized by, and has little to gain from, anti-Americanism. A December Gallup poll showed President Obama's favorability rating at 64% (ahead of all public figures but Uribe) and the United States' at 70%. The poll also revealed continuing support for the U.S. Free Trade Agreement (72%), extradition of criminals to the United States (59%), and the Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA, 71%). Still, all segments of the political spectrum portray the perceived silence of the USG in the face of Venezuelan bellicosity as an abandonment of a close

ally (ref G). Some on the left could use this to argue that the DCA is not worth the regional political costs.

¶14. (C) Pardo said the DCA should have been reviewed by Congress, but that he would honor it. Petro said he would not recognize the DCA "occupation" as legitimate. Pardo told the Inter-American Dialogue that the Uribe Administration erred by linking all bilateral issues to the Free Trade Agreement and said, "with the Obama Administration, Colombia is on a stationary bike in its relations with the United States." Dussan told us the U.S.-Colombia relationship should continue as is, but the PDA wants the USG to review its counternarcotics policy, which he termed "a complete failure." Petro has publicly said that he opposes coca eradication and extradition, and would explore a "new agenda" with the United States (see ref H for his discussion with the Ambassador).

Left Weaknesses:

Terrorists & Security

¶15. (SBU) The FARC's continued existence creates an atmosphere where the use of "terrorist" or "terrorist sympathizer" labels against opposition politicians is tolerated. Uribe once called Petro, a former M-19 guerilla, a "terrorist in a suit." The label not only delegitimizes the opposition, it can make them targets for violence. The far-left learned this lesson in the mid-80s when the FARC's first venture into party politics, the Patriotic Union (UP), witnessed the murder of 2,000-3,000 party members at the hands of paramilitaries. PDA leaders told us they receive frequent death threats and are concerned for the safety of their members. Sympathetic statements for the FARC by some on the left, including PL Senator Piedad Cordoba, add to the stigma. Unlike others in the PDA, Petro has consistently opposed the FARC and its tactics.

¶16. (C) The tremendous security gains and popularity of Uribe's Democratic Security policy -- 73% approve of Uribe's handling of the guerrillas -- leaves the left little political space on security policy. The PL officially endorses Democratic Security, while Dussan told us the PDA has confidence in the upper ranks of the military and police. However, the PDA has less confidence in lower levels because of human rights abuses and corruption.

Social Issues:

The Left's Potential Political Space

¶17. (C) The political space for the left lies in specific traditional social issues. Despite economic progress, severe inequality and poverty remain -- a December poll shows that 70% disapprove of Uribe's handling of unemployment and 53% of his handling of poverty, while 52-53% believe the economy and corruption are getting worse. However, respondents approved of Uribe's handling of social issues like childhood assistance (73% approved), low-income housing (69%), education (71%), health care (58%), and public services (59%). Other issues for potential left engagement include rising crime rates in big cities, land tenure, and victims' restitution. However, the left has yet to demonstrate it can play an overall constructive role on these questions rather

than simply opposing the Uribe coalition. This partly explains the disconnect between the left and the citizenry. Also, Uribe's social policies have helped make him the preferred candidate of the poorer classes (75% favorability, compared with 27% for Pardo and 29% for Petro). Petro acknowledged to us that Uribe "owns" the poor given his "populist" programs. He said that for the left to gain political prominence, it would need to propose solutions for Colombians' problems, something Uribe excels at.

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